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The Barrow that was Red and Wheel for a Reason

Many words have more than one meaning, just like a poem contains many different themes. However, the difference between a poem and a word is the fact that a poem uses the different connotations and denotations of small individual units to create multiple pictures. In turn, a word is a well-drawn detail, and a poem is a masterpiece full of well constructed details. In William Charles Williams’ poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” the connotations and denotations of words such as “red,” “wheel,” and “barrow” stress the reliance of simple tools for the existence of mankind.

One of the most important words in the poem is “barrow.” A “barrow” can be a handcart or a frame with two short handles at each end used for carrying a load. In line four the word “barrow” is a cart that carries a load. With that in mind, one can conclude the barrow does an immense amount of work. The act of carrying a load may also hint to the barrow as a tool in sustaining the life around it. The barrow’s work is essential for the survival of others and, the load the barrow carries is the existence of others. This definition can be supported in line one with the words “so much depends.” This line describes the barrow as useful and highly important. The phrase “so much” makes the word “depends” move to a stronger level (1). Not only is the barrow relied on, but the existence of the barrow is essential. The word “upon” clarifies the subject of the description as the barrow (2).

The words “red” and “wheel” describe the “barrow” in line three. The color “red” describes the color of blood or the ruby when used as an adjective. The word “red,” when a noun, is the color of blood or a ruby. In line three, “red” is an adjective referring to the color of the barrow. Using the definition of “red” as the color of blood, one could view the color of the barrow as a symbol of the pain and hard work that the barrow performs for its master. The color “red” could also symbolize the idea of the barrow being a priceless jewel, since red is the color of a ruby. Even though the barrow is just a tool, the pain and work put into the barrow makes the barrow an indispensable treasure.

The next word that describes the “barrow” is “wheel.” The word “wheel” can be a round frame turning on a pin or shaft in the center. In the poem, “wheel” describes the barrow as having a wheel as a part of the barrow’s structure. However, “wheel” may also refer to the barrow as object that is continuous in cycle. The barrow maybe used every day in all seasons and weather to perform the same task. These findings continue to prove the importance of the barrow to the daily life of its master.

When the words “wheel” and “barrow” are put together, such as in the title of the poem, the meanings of the words change slightly. “Wheelbarrow” is a small vehicle with a wheel at one end and two handles at the other. In a sense, the meanings of “wheel” and “barrow” are put together without changing the meaning of each word, but the meaning of both words put together has a greater connotation. One possible connotation is the idea of a cart that goes through a single cycle or routine on a daily basis and balances the problems of the day. A barrow and a wheelbarrow are tools that help fix problems. Going back to the definition of wheel as turning on a pin in the center, the “wheelbarrow” could be looked at as the center cart or tool. The barrow is the prime instrument of choice, and the rest of the tools, jobs, and problems revolve around the work of the barrow. Another way to look at the wheelbarrow is as a balance between many different problems. The base of a wheelbarrow is a wheel supported by two prongs. Just like the wheelbarrow stands due to a balancing act, the wheelbarrow is the support in helping fix the daily problems.

So far, all the lines and words in the poem have described the efforts and characteristics of the barrow. The remaining two stanzas address the care of the barrow. Even though the barrow is wide-utilized the treatment of the barrow does not match its importance. The barrow is kept with the chickens and out in the rain. Both situations are not respectable or wanted for a tool of such caliber as the barrow. However, one can note the importance of the barrow’s surroundings is far less than the importance of the barrow’s work. The title singles out the importance of the barrow and does not refer to the barrow’s impoverished environment. Only the description of the barrow as “red” and “wheel” is significant. The idea of a title is to summarize the importance of a literary work. Since there is no mention of chickens or water in the title, one can see that the truly important characteristic is the barrow’s hard work and sacrifice.

In conclusion, the “barrow” is a symbol of a hard working individual or item that works hard for the existence of others without being recognized. The barrow continues to work not only for the survival of others, but because it is the only way the barrow knows how to survive. Without a load the barrow would not be “red” or “wheel.” The “barrow” would simply be an object and not a tool for others to use.

Works Cited

“The Red Wheel Barrow.” Perrine’s Literature Structure, Sound and Sense. Ed. Thomas

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